

THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF THE RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT

The Fundamental Principles are vital to the unity of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

by Dr. János Hantos

The historical importance of the principles and ideals that influence human activities can be measured by their expansion, their impact and their duration.

It is humanity's instinct for self-preservation that has made the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement what it is—a vital force that has for decades played a decisive part in enriching human values; after 125 years of life it has lost none of its attraction, its influence is widespread and its membership steadily growing. Unquestionably its influence extends throughout the world, even though its development is beset with difficulties.

The Movement has, indeed, always overcome its difficulties, and far from shirking challenges to it has always tackled them constructively.

It has shown this constructive approach in the long process that ultimately led to the formulation of the Fundamental Principles, and in its progressive realization that having become a universal movement, it had necessarily to adopt a doctrine to which everyone could subscribe.

The theoretical basis of the Movement

The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross were not formulated until 1921, 58 years after it was founded. By then it was expanding rapidly. It was no theory that led Henry Dunant to act as he did; his motives were overwhelmingly humanitarian and moral. His selfless desire to alleviate human suffering and bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield came first. The principles were formulated later. Thus his humanitarian action preceded and was the source of inspiration for them.

It was then realized that the selfless desire to bring assistance and give voluntary humanitarian service would have to be organized on a worldwide scale, within a movement whose high ideals and code of action would rally support.

By the end of the First World War, National Red Cross Societies recognized by the International Committee of the Red Cross were at work in all continents—fifteen of them in Europe, seven on the American continent, five in Asia, and one in Africa. It was plain that working as they did in widely differing settings and circumstances, they could not grow into an international movement unless they followed a common code of conduct.

History must give the ICRC credit for realizing this. Unquestionably, the unhappy experience of the “Great War” influenced the formulation of the first Principles in 1921. These were *impartiality*, political, religious and economic *independence*, *universality*, and the *equality* of National Red Cross Societies.

Although the League of Red Cross Societies was already in existence in 1921, its Board of Governors did not examine the Principles of the Red Cross until after the Second World War—at its XIXth session (Oxford, 1946) and XXth Session (Stockholm, 1948). The four Fundamental Principles formulated in 1921 were confirmed, and thirteen supplementary Principles were added, together with six rules for their application.¹ The Eighteenth International Conference of the Red Cross (Toronto, 1952) reaffirmed the resolutions adopted by the League’s Board of Governors.²

The decision-making bodies of the International Red Cross were certainly in no hurry to define and apply the Principles of the Red Cross! Later on, however, the situation improved. First of all, careful examination showed that the resolutions of 1946, 1948 and 1952 were not altogether in accordance with the Fundamental Principles. Jean Pictet’s “Red Cross Principles”,³ published in 1955, was a landmark in the history of the Fundamental Principles. It considered with scientific precision the nature of the Red Cross (then a 92-year-old organization with many remarkable achievements to its credit) and set

¹ Board of Governors, XIXth Session, Oxford, 1946, Resolution 12, and Board of Governors, XXth Session, Stockholm, 1948, Resolution 7, *International Red Cross Handbook* (hereinafter *Handbook*), 12th edition, 1983, pp. 549-552.

² *Ibid.*, p. 552.

³ Jean Pictet, *Red Cross Principles*, International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva, 1955.

about deducing a doctrine from it. In so doing Pictet rendered the Red Cross an inestimable service.

The seven Fundamental Principles proclaimed by the Twentieth International Conference of the Red Cross (Vienna, 1965) are based on Pictet's study. They are *a concise statement of the doctrine of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement*, and the main source of its unity.

The influence of the Fundamental Principles

The Twentieth International Conference proclaimed the Fundamental Principles, and decided that these would be read out with due solemnity at the opening of each International Conference of the Red Cross.⁴ One of the Movement's main tasks is now to disseminate knowledge of the Fundamental Principles. This has done much to unite it still further and give it a clear profile. Even so, this remarkable progress cannot conceal present weaknesses.

We now have to find out *how, and how far, the Fundamental Principles are influencing the development of the Movement*. The ceremony of reading them out at the Movement's meetings, the many references to them and the declarations on the unity of the Movement are certainly important, but does all this mean that each component of the Movement purely and simply observes and strictly applies the Fundamental Principles in its work? Experience shows that this is a reasonable question, and this is why I said at the meeting of the Council of Delegates on 23 October 1986 that it was necessary to scrutinize the application of the Principles and that the ICRC should take the lead in doing so.

The ICRC reacted very constructively by forming a Working Group on Respect for and Dissemination of the Fundamental Principles. This Group made an intermediary report to the session of the Council of Delegates of 27 October 1989,⁵ which adopted a highly important resolution reading:

⁴ Twentieth International Conference of the Red Cross, Vienna, 1965, Resolutions VIII, IX, *Handbook*, p. 552.

⁵ *Respect for and dissemination of the Fundamental Principles—Intermediary Report of the ICRC on the on-going Study*, document presented by the International Committee of the Red Cross (CD/8/1), Council of Delegates, Geneva, 26-27 October 1989.

“The Council of Delegates, ...

1. reaffirms the importance of ensuring respect for the Fundamental Principles by the Movement’s components and the need to disseminate the Principles also among the general public,

2. requests the ICRC to continue the study in consultation with all the National Societies, the League and the Henry Dunant Institute,

3. invites the components of the Movement to collect any material they consider useful for promoting understanding and dissemination of the Principles and to forward it to the ICRC, ...”.

The aim of the Movement

The formulation of the seven Fundamental Principles in 1965 is one of the Movement’s major theoretical accomplishments. They are undoubtedly clearer and more rigorous than the principles previously formulated. They improve and refine the Movement’s doctrine—particularly, I would say, the principle of humanity.

It would be interesting to try and find out why the concept of humanity was not introduced as a principle until the Movement had been in existence for a century! It is however more important to emphasize that this principle expresses the very essence of the Movement and has given it a clear objective and a theoretical basis that accentuate the Movement’s specific characteristics. In short, this concept has opened up new horizons to the Movement.

It is a recognized historical fact that the Red Cross was founded with the noble intention of alleviating the suffering of war wounded and protecting war victims. Interpreting this too loosely, to mean that the Red Cross should support efforts to settle armed conflicts and endorse attempts to arrive at peaceful settlements of international conflicts, would cast doubt upon the very reasons for its existence and could lead to its downfall.

In fact the formation of the League of Red Cross Societies has meant that the initial aim of the Red Cross has been extended to humanitarian activities in peacetime. This was clearly shown in 1961 when the League adopted the motto *Per humanitatem ad pacem*, which appears after the motto *Inter arma caritas* in the Preamble of the new Statutes of the Movement, which were adopted in 1986.

The inclusion of the principle of humanity may therefore be regarded as a change of concept, as it has broadened the scope of the national and international activities of the Red Cross and Red Crescent

Movement and sanctioned a liberal interpretation of its humanitarian mission for the benefit of humanity. The Fundamental Principles have crystallized the Movement's doctrine and set out the rules guiding its actions. These embody the concept of active charity and give the Movement new strength. As Jean Pictet writes in his commentary on the principle of humanity: "*the principle of humanity, from which all the other principles flow, obviously has to stand in first place. As the basis of the institution, it provides at the same time its ideal, its motivation and its objective. It is indeed the prime mover for the whole movement...*"⁶

The Fundamental Principles as the Movement's greatest unifying force

The profound significance and efficacy of the principle of humanity and of the other Fundamental Principles give them their value and authority. How, then, can the Principles influence the actions of the Movement's components? I think we should and must continuously evaluate the Movement's activities and carefully monitor the application of the Fundamental Principles. Experience clearly shows that there is room for improvement. Interestingly, the Tansley Report on the reappraisal of the role of the Red Cross did not carry its examination of the Fundamental Principles far enough.⁷ The most severe of its critical observations is that "*the Red Cross Movement today suffers from a lack of cohesion. It particularly lacks a sense of common purpose, a basic role which all of its organs share.*"⁸

The Hungarian Red Cross, commenting on the Tansley Report in 1976, disagreed with that opinion and said that the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement does have a cohesive force and a common purpose. I believe that the Fundamental Principles are the Movement's greatest cohesive force, and that the quintessence of the Movement lies in the principle of humanity. A paper prepared by a particularly active National Society says that the Movement's aim is the same as its mission, stated in the first paragraph of the Preamble to its Statutes. Admittedly the wording of that paragraph is not the same

⁶ Jean Pictet, *The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross. Commentary*, Henry Dunant Institute, Geneva, 1979, pp. 21-22.

⁷ Donald Tansley, *Final Report: An Agenda for Red Cross*. Reappraisal of the Role of the Red Cross, Geneva, 1975.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 47.

as that of the principle of humanity, but I cannot see that the two texts contradict each other on any matter of principle. All the same, I think that the Movement's aims and activities should be fully considered and the conclusions submitted to the Council of Delegates at one of its forthcoming sessions. My starting point is that *the aim of the Movement is set out in the principle of humanity*, as follows: "...Its purpose is to protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being." In theory, if all the components of the Movement interpreted this aim in the same way they would all work on the same lines. If, however, they did not all interpret that aim in the same way, and if it were considered advisable to specify separate aims for the Movement, the ICRC, the League and the National Societies, there would inevitably be so many different interpretations that the Movement's *fundamental unity* would be at risk. I say *fundamental unity* because the Movement's components all have statutes of their own and, of course, different programmes, commitments, methods of organization and procedures. But for that very reason they should be firmly linked by a common aim which they would work to achieve, although of course the independence and specific nature of each of them in discharging their own mandate would be duly respected.

Practical conclusions

It has been said that if the Fundamental Principles are properly worded they should be observed in the spirit rather than in the letter. I know that words cannot always express ideas clearly enough. In this respect I completely agree with Jean Pictet's dictum that "*To achieve their purpose ... principles must be presented clearly, so that they are understood by everyone*".⁹ The common aim stated in the principle of humanity is subject to this rule, which if not respected will make fundamental unity very hard to achieve. If that were to happen the text would be interpreted in so many different ways that it might be hard to apply the Principles, and the unity of the Movement would be jeopardized.

I believe that the unity of the Movement would be consolidated if a *common programme* could be worked out to reach the common objective. (I can already hear your protests!). In October 1989 the ICRC and the League ratified an agreement stating exactly how they

⁹ Jean Pictet, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

were to co-operate in humanitarian activities, and fixing guidelines in several fields of activity. This is splendid, but I still feel that it does not go far enough.

Why? Because if we accept that the purpose of the Movement is correctly stated in the principle of humanity, we should try to agree on a global platform defining the responsibilities that the *whole of the Movement* intends to accept to protect health and ensure respect for the human being. We would then give a clear, concise and encouraging answer to the questions put by persons interested in the Red Cross, who want to support it and intend to take part in its work.

The Movement's aims and programme in a changing world

A document stating the Movement's common aim and common programme would demonstrate the Movement's real unity and make it easier for its components to co-ordinate their activities in all fundamental respects. It would encourage activities in an agreed common direction without prejudice to the independence of each component of the Movement. The general public does not usually know the difference between the International Committee of the Red Cross and the League, and often talks about the International Red Cross without saying which of its components it has in mind. This should prompt us to work all the harder to promote the Movement's unity more effectively. In preventing and alleviating human suffering, the certainty that victims will be given valid assistance is always more valuable than a formal definition of respective competences. This is what the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross lead us to believe; everyone in need, and public opinion, expects no less of us.

We cannot, of course, expect the common programme to lay down exactly what work each component is to do, but only to provide general guidelines for them to follow, which will enable them to orient their programmes to further the common aim in so far as their ability and means allow.

One important question remains, namely the extent to which each of the Movement's components is to participate in preventing and alleviating suffering. It seems natural for these activities to remain an ICRC and League priority, but National Societies that form the framework of the Movement also have a decisive part to play. As their methods and the extent of their participation differ widely, it seems to me that a joint statement of policy in this connection, allowing for the

specific nature and functions of the members of the Movement, would help to resolve the question. It would clear away doubts and reservations and help the accomplishment of our humanitarian mission.

Is the Movement independent?

This article was not intended to deal separately with each of the Fundamental Principles, but to concentrate on the most general problems. I cannot however end without touching on one aspect of the principle of independence. In a document submitted to the recent session of the Council of Delegates I asked: "Is the Movement independent?",¹⁰ a problem that has been on my mind since the Statutes of the International Red Cross were revised. I feel justified in asking this question by a resolution of the Twenty-fifth International Conference of the Red Cross. There is, to my mind, a contradiction between the composition, character and title of the International Conference (which are confirmed in the new Statutes) and the principle of independence. I am taking up this position because I regard the principle of independence, as set out in the declaration of the Fundamental Principles, as highly important, whereas the composition of the International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent makes me doubt that this principle really exists. The International Conference is in fact stated to be the supreme deliberative body for the Movement, at which "*representatives of the components of the Movement meet with representatives of the States Parties to the Geneva Conventions ... Together they examine and decide upon humanitarian matters of common interest and any other related matter*" (Article 8 of the Statutes).

I do of course believe it is necessary for the representatives of the components of the Movement and of the States party to the Geneva Conventions to examine humanitarian questions of common interest regularly and jointly, and to take decisions on them. But the title of the Conference should be the *International Conference of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and of the States Party to the Geneva Conventions* (instead of International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent). The difference is, I think, obvious. The governments concerned would probably not object if the Statutes of the Movement were modified to a reasonable extent so as to clarify the present situation, which casts doubt again on the principle of inde-

¹⁰ *Respect for and Dissemination of the Fundamental Principles, op. cit.*, p. 32.

pendence. In the Movement's supreme deliberative body, the representatives of its components should take decisions by themselves, independently of governments.

The circumstances in which the new Statutes were adopted in 1986 were not propitious to tabling any amendment of this kind, but if a consensus could be reached there would still be time to table one at the next International Conference.

To conclude, I am delighted to see that the *International Review of the Red Cross* is opening its columns to constructive debate on the essential problems of the doctrine of our Movement. I am sure that applying our common aim will encourage us to explore, later on, another fundamental question, namely, what must we do to ensure respect for the Fundamental Principles? I think this question is unavoidable if we really do want to strengthen the unity of the Movement.

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Dr. János Hantos was born at Békéscsaba, Hungary, in 1927. In 1954 he was appointed to the University of Budapest, and taught philosophy for ten years. He is also a Doctor of Political Science. He was elected to the City Council of Budapest in 1962, and became Deputy Mayor at the end of 1964. He was elected Secretary-General of the National Board of the Hungarian Red Cross by the IVth Congress of the Hungarian Red Cross in 1973, and Chairman of the National Executive Committee by the Vth Congress in 1977. After 17 years' uninterrupted service Dr. Hantos retired on 1 January 1990, but has continued to serve as a Red Cross volunteer. At the Twenty-fourth International Conference of the Red Cross (Manila, 1981), he became Vice-Chairman of the Standing Commission of the International Red Cross, and was re-elected a member of that Commission by the Twenty-fifth Conference in 1986.